



CONSTRUCTING GENDER IDENTITIES IN DEATH: RETHINKING MORTUARY ARCHAEOLOGY THROUGH THE EVIDENCE OF SINAULI

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Abstract: Nestled in the fertile plains of the Upper Ganga–Yamuna Doab, the site of Sinauli in Baghpat district, Uttar Pradesh, unearthed in 2005 and further excavated in 2018 by the ASI, has emerged as one of the most significant Late Harappan and Chalcolithic burial grounds, representing the OCP culture. Among its many discoveries, the burials of women interred with copper antenna swords, decorated coffins, and intricate grave goods stand apart as evidence of women warriors, revealing that gender in this society was not merely a biological category but a construct deeply embedded in social, symbolic, and ritual hierarchies.

This paper historically and archaeologically explores the three prominent women burials of Sinauli in contrast with the male burials of the site, examining differential funerary practices to illuminate gender roles, social stratification, and hierarchies within the late Harappan Chalcolithic milieu. Through a micro-analysis of the burial record, drawing on archaeological material as primary evidence and contextualizing it through secondary scholarly interpretations, the study interrogates questions of dynamics of power and shifting meanings of gender in proto-historic Indian society, demonstrating how Sinauli offers invaluable glimpses into a cultural landscape where gender intersects with ritual, authority, social organization, and conceptions of the afterlife.

Index Terms: Women warriors, Women burials, Dynamics of power, Gender distinction.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Chalcolithic landscape of the Upper Ganga–Yamuna Doab, situated between the cultural worlds of the Harappan tradition and the emerging Painted Grey Ware horizon, has long intrigued archaeologists for its potential to illuminate transitional societies. Among the most striking discoveries in this region is the site of Sinauli, located in Baghpat district, Uttar Pradesh. First unearthed in 2005 and later subjected to systematic excavation by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 2018, Sinauli has yielded a vast array of burials, coffins, copper artefacts, and distinctive grave goods, making it one of the most significant protohistoric burial grounds of the Late Harappan Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) cultural complex [8]. The finds from this site have fundamentally altered our understanding of burial practices, social hierarchies, and the symbolic meanings attached to death in north India during the second millennium BCE [6].

Within this archaeological panorama, the burials of women stand apart as an exceptional category. Unlike conventional interpretations of prehistoric gender roles, which often emphasize the predominance of men in martial or ritual contexts, Sinauli has presented evidence of women interred with copper antenna swords, decorated coffins, and elaborate grave furnishings [5]. These features challenge both the assumed passivity of women in early agrarian societies and the simplistic binaries of gender that have dominated earlier archaeological discourse [2]. The association of martial symbols with female burials raises critical questions: Were these women warriors, priestesses, or ritual leaders? Or do these objects symbolize alternative conceptions of authority and power, where gender boundaries were more fluid than traditionally imagined?

This paper takes the position that mortuary practices are not neutral reflections of biological sex but cultural constructions of identity and hierarchy [1]. In this sense, gender in death becomes a symbolic medium through which broader questions of power, ritual, and cosmology are articulated. By analyzing the three prominent female burials at Sinauli in comparison with male burials, this study interrogates the ways in which gendered identities were performed, memorialized, and legitimized within a Chalcolithic context. Such an approach draws upon theoretical insights from gender archaeology, which emphasizes the interplay of ideology, material culture, and symbolic practice in shaping notions of masculinity and femininity [4].

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the local context of Sinauli. It compels us to reconsider how gender operated as a social and ritual category in late Harappan India, how authority was negotiated in protohistoric communities, and how the materiality of grave goods intersected with notions of afterlife and cultural memory [9]. The findings suggest that rather than a monolithic or static system, gender identities were dynamic constructs embedded within stratified social orders. Ultimately, this paper argues that the evidence from Sinauli provides a rare and invaluable window into the intersection of gender, power, and ritual in the protohistoric cultural fabric of South Asia.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Burials have long been central to archaeology, not just as reflections of life but as symbolic spaces where identities and hierarchies are constructed. Since the mid-20th century, post-processual scholars like Ian Hodder have emphasized that material culture, including graves, encodes social meanings [1]. Gender archaeology, emerging in the 1970s–80s through scholars such as Margaret Conkey, Joan Gero, and Sarah Nelson, highlighted how women were often marginalized in interpretation and argued that grave goods and burial contexts must be read critically as symbolic representations of gender [2][4].

In India, studies have focused on Harappan sites such as Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, and Rakhigarhi, where burials were relatively simple despite urban affluence. Scholars like B.B. Lal and R.S. Bisht saw this as a sign of restraint, though variations at sites like Farmana hinted at social distinctions [3]. Gender, however, remained underexplored in the South Asian archaeological discourse.

The Sinauli excavations (2018) transformed this discussion with elaborate burials, coffins, swords, and vehicles, especially women buried with martial symbols. While Sanjay Manjul and B.N. Prabhakar suggest these may signal female ritual or martial authority [3][7], others argue the symbolism may not reflect literal warriorhood. Comparable debates exist globally in Viking, Scythian, and Shang burials, where women with weapons complicate gender binaries [4].

Thus, mortuary archaeology underscores that burials are cultural texts and that gender must be seen as symbolic and relational [1]. Sinauli contributes to global debates by challenging entrenched views of gender, ritual, and authority in South Asian protohistory.

III. ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

The excavations at Sinauli across two phases, 2005 and 2018, have progressively revealed the extraordinary depth of this burial site [8]. The initial 2005 excavation unearthed 116 burials comprising extended inhumations and secondary burials in urns, with grave goods including ceramics, beads, semi-precious stones, and occasional copper implements. Several burials followed a north-south orientation consistent with broader Harappan practices, though the presence of elaborate grave goods and decorated pottery pointed to regional variations within the OCP horizon [8]. The landmark 2018 ASI excavation, however, brought Sinauli to the forefront of archaeological debate. It uncovered wooden coffins overlaid with copper sheets representing the earliest known coffins in the Indian subcontinent, alongside copper antenna swords, shields, helmets, and other martial paraphernalia that dramatically departed from modest Harappan burial customs [6][7]. Among the most sensational finds were three burials accompanied by wheeled vehicles, often referred to as chariots, though scholars continue to debate whether they represent true chariots or carts [5], situating Sinauli within wider discussions on Indo-Aryan migrations, warfare, and ritual symbolism in early India [9].

IV. GENDERED DISTINCTIONS IN BURIAL PRACTICES

Within this extraordinary assemblage, the burials of three women interred with weapons and elaborate grave goods stand out [5]. These women were placed in decorated coffins, accompanied by copper antenna swords or objects conventionally associated with warfare and authority. One burial included a shield-like copper object placed near the body, while another displayed a long copper sword positioned alongside the coffin [7]. These associations raise crucial interpretive questions. Were these women active warriors, symbols of a martial aristocracy, or ritual specialists whose authority was encoded through the symbolism of weapons [5]?

The contrast with male burials at Sinauli is instructive. While several men were also buried with grave goods, they were often less elaborate and lacked the combination of coffins, weapons, and decorative elements seen in the female burials [6]. The male burials tended to feature utilitarian objects like pottery, beads, and occasional copper implements, suggesting that martial symbolism was not uniformly distributed across the cemetery. This differential treatment complicates traditional assumptions that weapons in burials automatically denote male warriors [2], pointing instead to a more nuanced cultural framework where gender, power, and ritual authority intersected.

V. MATERIAL ASSEMBLAGE AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Apart from coffins and weapons, Sinauli yielded a rich array of funerary objects including antenna swords, daggers, copper helmets with conical designs, embossed copper shields, and embossed copper discs likely associated with harness equipment [6][7]. Pottery types such as dish-on-stands, storage jars, bowls, and vases characteristic of OCP traditions were also recovered, alongside semi-precious stone beads and ornamental items indicative of personal adornment as integral to identity construction in death [8]. A few graves additionally revealed evidence of animal sacrifices, suggesting ritual offerings and symbolic connections between humans and animals in conceptions of the afterlife. Cumulatively, this evidence positions Sinauli as an unparalleled site in South Asian archaeology and compels a rethinking of established gender narratives in protohistoric India [5]. The three female burials in particular, by associating women with martial symbols, decorated coffins, and elite funerary display, disrupt simplistic models of patriarchal dominance and instead point to a society where gender roles were negotiable and authority could be expressed through multiple symbolic registers, including martial imagery, ritual performance, and funerary elaboration [3].

VI. GENDERED MORTUARY PRACTICES AT SINAULI

Mortuary archaeology understands burials as symbolic acts through which communities articulate identity, hierarchy, and memory. In this framework, gender is actively constructed through material assemblage, spatial treatment, and ritual symbolism rather than being reducible to biological sex [1]. At Sinauli, this is most compellingly illustrated by the three prominent female burials identified by Asko Parpola as burials 1, 3, and 6 [5], which challenge normative expectations of gendered funerary treatment. These graves are distinguished not only by their association with carts or proto-chariots, symbols conventionally linked to male warriors and elite authority in other cultural contexts, but also by their markedly distinct treatment compared to male burials at the site, suggesting that martial and ritual authority in this protohistoric society was not exclusively a male domain [5][6].

Coffins: Steatite vs. Copper

The coffins of these women diverge materially from those of men. While male coffins at Sinauli were often decorated with copper sheeting, the female coffins displayed designs created with steatite inlays, a choice of material that may carry significant symbolic weight [7]. Steatite, known for its softness and aesthetic appeal, was often associated with ornamentation and ritual usage, whereas copper evoked strength, durability, and martial connotations. This contrast suggests that gender identities were materially distinguished even at the level of coffin decoration, with women's burials emphasizing symbolic and ritual refinement while men's evoked durability and utilitarian symbolism [5].

Covered vs. Uncovered Burials

Another striking difference lies in the treatment of the burials from above. Women's coffins were carefully covered from the top, enclosing the body within a protected and concealed space, as found in burials 3 and 6 according to Manjul [7]. Male burials, in contrast, were generally left uncovered, exposing the coffin from above. This distinction could symbolically reflect cultural conceptions of gender: women associated with enclosure, containment, and ritual seclusion, while men were linked to openness and visibility [5]. The act of covering female burials might also suggest a heightened sacredness, shielding these women from profane visibility and emphasizing their liminal authority in death.

Symbolic Liminality

Adding to this complexity is the observation that in some of the women's burials, feet were absent. Whether this was the result of preservation issues or a deliberate ritual practice remains debated [5], but if intentional, it could indicate a symbolic severing of earthly mobility. By removing or omitting the feet, the community may have emphasized the deceased women's transformation from earthly beings into liminal or transcendent figures [1]. In contrast, male burials retained anatomical wholeness, reinforcing more grounded and earthly associations.

VII. WEAPONS, GENDER, AND RITUAL AUTHORITY

Mortuary practices do not merely reflect personal identities but also function as performative statements of social hierarchy [1]. The differentiation observed in the burials at Sinauli, between men and women, elite and ordinary, weapon-associated and modest, illustrates a stratified society where funerary elaboration served as a visible index of power and status. By analyzing the role of coffins, carts, and grave goods, we gain insight into how authority was symbolically encoded in the late Harappan Chalcolithic milieu [6].

Weapons found in the female burials, including copper antenna swords, shields, and martial paraphernalia, further complicate straightforward interpretation, raising the question of whether these women were active warriors or figures of ritual authority whose graves encoded symbolic power [5]. Parpola's identification of these burials as female, combined with their association with carts and weapons, disrupts long-held assumptions that martial symbols were inherently male-coded [5], suggesting instead a society where women could embody martial imagery whether literally or symbolically. Crucially, the absence of such elaborate martial symbolism in most male burials underscores that martial identity was not universally male but selectively inscribed onto exceptional female figures [3]. Taken together, the differential treatment across burials, namely carts in women's graves, steatite-decorated versus copper coffins, and covered versus uncovered burials, demonstrates that gender at Sinauli was not a biological constant but a ritually constructed category [2]. Women were marked in death as exceptional figures, enclosed, symbolically elevated, and distinguished through their association with vehicles, weapons, and elite funerary display, while men were buried with comparatively modest assemblages, their identities grounded rather than transcendent [6].

Coffins as Markers of Elite Status

The use of decorated wooden coffins at Sinauli is a clear marker of elite identity. Coffins themselves are rare in South Asian archaeology, making their presence extraordinary [8]. The copper-sheet decorations on male coffins and steatite-inlaid motifs on female coffins underscore not only gendered distinctions but also the broader significance of funerary display [7]. Coffins were not neutral containers; they were highly symbolic objects that transformed the deceased into sacred figures, separated from the mundane world. Their decoration suggests investment of labour, resources, and craftsmanship, accessible only to those of high social standing [3]. In this sense, coffins at Sinauli were instruments of ritual elevation, underscoring elite identity in death.

Carts and the Politics of Authority

The discovery of wheeled vehicles (proto-chariots or carts) in association with female burials dramatically amplifies this narrative of stratification [5]. Wheeled vehicles are historically associated with mobility, warfare, and power; their presence in female burials suggests that these women embodied an extraordinary level of authority, possibly linked to martial or ritual leadership [6]. In many ancient societies, vehicles in graves symbolized not only military prowess but also divine or royal status, enabling the deceased to traverse both earthly and cosmic realms. At Sinauli, their selective association with women implies that female authority was not peripheral but central to elite social identity [5].

Grave Goods and Ritual Symbolism

The assemblage of weapons, shields, and copper helmets further points to funerary elaboration as a marker of authority [7]. While these items could denote literal martial participation, they may also have functioned as ritual symbols of protection [4]. In many ancient traditions, grave goods were intended not only for earthly remembrance but also for equipping the deceased in the afterlife. At Sinauli, the presence of weapons with women could suggest that they were envisioned as protectors or guardians, roles imbued with ritual as well as social significance [5]. Pottery, beads, and ornaments in other burials represent more modest offerings, reinforcing the stratified nature of funerary investment [8].

Conceptions of the Afterlife

The elaborate funerary treatment of certain individuals at Sinauli indicates that protohistoric communities of the Ganga–Yamuna Doab maintained complex ideas of the afterlife [9]. The presence of vehicles, weaponry, and richly adorned coffins suggests that death was not seen as an end but as a transition to another realm, where social identities, particularly those of elites, were carried forward [1]. By marking women with martial and ritual symbolism, the community ensured their continued authority beyond death. In this sense, the funerary practices at Sinauli can be seen as a form of ritual legitimation, reinforcing both social hierarchy and gendered authority in the cultural imagination [5].

Intersections of Gender and Class

The evidence demonstrates that gender at Sinauli cannot be understood in isolation from social stratification [2]. Women were not uniformly empowered; only certain women of elite status were buried with coffins, carts, and martial goods. The vast majority of burials, both male and female, remained modest, with simple grave goods [6]. Thus, gendered distinctions intersected with class-based stratification: elite women were elevated in death, while ordinary women and men were interred in simpler ways. This highlights that mortuary practices reflected not only gender roles but also the interplay of power, wealth, and ritual authority in shaping cultural memory [4].

VIII. DEBATES AND ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

The Sinauli burials, though remarkable in their preservation and richness, have generated intense scholarly debate. Much of this revolves around the interpretation of the three women's burials (1, 3, and 6, as identified by Parpola [5]), where artefacts such as copper antenna swords, shields, and carts were recovered. These finds have been heralded as evidence of women warriors, a notion supported by parallels in Scythian and Viking contexts where women interred with weapons were later confirmed through osteological studies to have fought in battle [4]. This reading challenges androcentric models of the past by recognizing women as active agents in warfare [2].

However, other scholars caution against equating weapons directly with warriorhood. They argue that swords and vehicles may have held ritual or symbolic roles, marking women as priestesses, guardians, or leaders in cosmological rites [3]. Here, martial symbolism is understood as metaphoric rather than functional, representing power and ritual authority rather than literal combat. This tension between "warrior" and "ritual leader" remains central to the interpretative debate [5].

A second controversy surrounds the wheeled vehicles. While the ASI initially described them as chariots, suggesting continuity with Indo-Aryan traditions of horse-drawn warfare, critics have noted the absence of spoked wheels and other features typical of Bronze Age chariots elsewhere [6]. They are more plausibly ox-drawn carts, used in funerary ceremonies as symbols of elite status rather than instruments of war [7]. The fact that these vehicles occur only in women's burials complicates any simplistic alignment with Vedic martial imagery [9].

Equally debated are the coffin decorations. Male coffins were adorned with copper sheets, while female coffins displayed steatite inlays — a striking gendered differentiation [7]. Some interpret this as symbolic of masculine martiality versus feminine ritual refinement; others see it as functional or aesthetic, warning against rigid symbolic readings [5]. Burial treatments add further complexity: women's coffins were covered from above, unlike men's, possibly denoting sacredness or protection. Moreover, the puzzling absence of feet in some female skeletons has sparked theories ranging from ritual mutilation to preservation bias, though no consensus exists [5][7].

Beyond material symbolism, some archaeologists warn against overemphasizing gender. Funerary variation may have expressed lineage, age, or ritual office as much as biological sex [1]. In this light, the association of weapons and vehicles with women could indicate membership in a particular cultic group rather than female empowerment per se [4].

Finally, the discoveries have been entangled in the Aryan migration debate. Proponents of an "Indigenous Aryan" model highlight the so-called "chariots" as evidence of Vedic culture within India c. 2000 BCE [9], while others urge caution, stressing technological differences between Sinauli carts and true steppe chariots [6]. The association of vehicles with women further undermines attempts to read the site as straightforwardly Vedic, suggesting instead a localized symbolic tradition within the Late Harappan–Chalcolithic milieu [5].

IX. CONCLUSION

The evidence from Sinauli demonstrates that gender identities in death were materially distinguished, even if their exact meanings remain uncertain. As Parpola has identified, burials 1, 3, and 6 were marked by carts, steatite-decorated coffins, covering from above, and weapons such as copper antenna swords [5], whereas male burials more commonly displayed copper-sheeted coffins without coverings and lacked such elaborate grave goods [6]. The absence of feet in some female skeletons further complicates interpretation, hinting at ritual or symbolic practices [7]. Taken together, these contrasts reveal that men and women were buried very differently, indicating stratification, hierarchy, or differentiated gender roles [2]. Yet, whether the women were truly warriors or not is still a matter of debate, and cannot be concluded without fuller reports and more evidence from the ASI [5][7]. For now, it is safest to conclude that while the specific gender roles remain unclear, the coffins and funerary treatments of men and women at Sinauli were undeniably distinct, embedding gender as a key marker of identity in the mortuary landscape [1].

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